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ABSTRACT

Mentoring is now a very popular, but loosely defined, feature of many programs for youth. The heart of mentoring is the relationship between the youth and the mentor, but little is actually known about this relationship. Mentoring should not be limited to at-risk youth, since many average students or underachievers from stable backgrounds may benefit from the boost that mentoring can provide. As it exists now, mentoring expresses two basic ideals and meets two basic social agendas: (1) to take care of youth, and (2) to make youth more resourceful. In the mentoring relationship, the youth and the mentor engage in joint activities in which an interpersonal attraction makes it possible for the youth to learn something from someone he or she has come to trust and admire. The relationship has social and psychological dimensions. A essential aspect is the identification with the adult that the youth experiences, an identification that helps the youth build a sense of self. It has been argued that the minority youth needs a minority mentor. It is true that a mentor outside the youth's ethnic and cultural world cannot easily understand that world, but this does not mean that he or she cannot be a good mentor. Relationships with unrelated adults outside the immediate family can help youth become more psychologically and emotionally resilient. If youth today cannot bring resilience to the relationships they form naturally, it can be brought to them through mentoring experiences. (SLD)

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The Mentoring Relationship in Action

In its essential character mentoring is a one-to-one relationship of a pair of unrelated individuals of different ages, carried out over time, and formed to support the development of the younger person, although the mentor also benefits from the relationship. Historically, such mentoring occurred as young people and adults came together naturally in the community, the schools, or the workplace. Today, however, youth are mentored in special programs by "strangers" who volunteer to mentor the youth.

Such planned mentoring is usually a very specific strategy for helping youth acquire particular competencies, like doing better in school or understanding and being prepared for the world of work, or to build character. Mentoring is now a very popular but loosely-defined feature in many youth education and training and service programs, although something like it was always a feature of these programs without actually being called mentoring.

The idea of mentoring youth is appealing to many who are looking for ways of helping youth develop better and become more socially and economically resourceful through a caring relationship, rather than through professionalized education and training programs and social services alone. Corporate officials, social service and educational professionals, individual benefactors, and community advocates, all see mentoring as a means to enhance the development of youth, particularly endangered youth, through a caring and helping relationship.

But do we know enough about this relationship between strangers for it to fulfill its promise for the youth? We face a dilemma: we want the volunteer mentor and the youth to form a relationship naturally and maintain it without undue programming, yet as a society we want it to lead to particular ends. In essence, we want the benefits of an arranged marriage but we want to pretend that it is a love match.

THE YOUTH IN MENTORING PROGRAMS

Many current youth mentoring programs are designed for youth who come from destructive family environments, live in unsafe neighborhoods, go to bad schools, easily accept deviant subcultures, and fall victim to a life of poverty and prejudice. Because their environments put them at risk rather than protect them from it, these youth do not have the opportunities and skills or do not know the strategies for making psychological, social, and economic choices in their best interest. More than any other group of youth, they are most at-risk for self-destructive behavior, like poor academic performance or school dropout, limited educational and employment aspirations, drug or alcohol abuse, juvenile crime, AIDS, suicide, and physical and mental health problems. For the most part these youth are not likely to have mentors — or the right kind of mentors — in the community, the school, or the workplace to help or care for them. They do not easily see alternatives to life as they know it, they limit their choices based on their often astute, but limited, reading of their options, or they act impulsively or violently to gratify themselves.

Mentoring, however, is not just for at-risk youth. It is also for youth who may have a stable home and community life, with few problems, but, who, because they are lower middle-class or poor, need services, opportunities, and environmental enrichments to help them to better academic achievement and greater career aspirations and opportunities. These youth are usually average students or underachievers with good school attendance records and no significant school or delinquency problems, and are personally motivated, although this motivation likely needs to be nurtured. They appear to need just a boost, and have needs that mentoring may be able to satisfy, unlike at-risk youth, whose needs can only be met by reconstructed social environments and a comprehensive youth policy.

GOALS FOR THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

Mentoring as it now exists expresses two basic ideals and meets two basic social agendas — one is to take care of youth, the other is to make them more resourceful.

To Take Care of Youth. Helping youth without enough psychological and social supports is at the heart of mentoring. We turn to volunteer mentoring to help the youth because we do not have comprehensive public policies for guiding and protecting youth, especially those at greatest risk for behavioral problems serious enough to mar their futures. The ideal of this kind of mentoring is to care for the "whole child." The mentor compensates for, or replaces, missing or destructive caretakers or absent services. The return on such an investment is the well-being of a future generation, including less pathology and more civility.

In one way or another all planned youth mentoring programs today are

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designed to catch youth at a time in their lives when they need help to develop psychologically or to learn how to negotiate important new experiences successfully. Many youth who are at-risk do not possess the cognitive and emotional capacities to use mentors to help them move forward. More than ever, then, mentors have to become auxiliary caretakers; they must find activities to help youth become responsible for their own safety, academic achievement, and occupational future. It could be said about this kind of mentoring that it helps the youth to use the mentor as a helper.

Mentoring as caretaking is most completely actualized in programs designed to counter deleterious influences in the youth's environment. Such comprehensive programs act as "safe havens" for the youth away from their usual life. Their aim is to enhance the youth's skills and confidence, teach them coping strategies, help them to recognize and seek appropriate rewards for their efforts, and foster their capacity to make healthy choices. In essence, the programs try to create a healthy replacement community for the developing youth.

Such mentoring does not transform the youth. Being mentored is only one of the youth's cumulative social and psychological experiences. Mentors do not pluck youth out of their environments and change their lives — their homes, communities, and schools remain fundamentally the same, whatever the mentor helps the youth achieve. Also, we cannot myopically assume that these youth are so alienated from their homes or communities that they will want to give them up. The youth both love and hate their homes and communities and understand their rewards and dangers. Because they know how to adapt to the familiar, the new mentoring environment may initially be the more dangerous.

To Make Youth More Resourceful. A second ideal of mentoring is to make the youth more economically viable at a time when many fear that low-income youth without the skills and attitudes needed in the changing workplace are in danger of being consigned to welfare dependence or low wages in low-skill jobs. Mentoring here is a strategy to develop the "resourcefulness" of youth, for their own good and society's. Because such mentoring meets a specific goal, it is more instrumental than caretaking.

Many education and training programs, including remedial, enrichment, and informal community activities, have mentoring components, although the mentoring is sometimes an adjunct to the primary services in these programs. The mentor and youth meet alone or in groups — in the community, at the youth's schools, and the mentor's workplace — but they usually do not have a sustained or caretaking relationship. The mentor becomes a resource for the youth, an additional member of an expanding social network to help the youth learn about the world of work, improve his or her academic achievement, apply to college, take care of a child, find out about a job, or discover a cultural opportunity. Mentoring in these programs is often highly focussed on helping the youth attain a specific goal. This kind of mentoring — popular because it resembles youth programs already in place and makes fewer demands on program officials, mentors, and the youth themselves — has some practical value, but, because it is less intense and more circumscribed for both the youth and the mentor, it is less influential than other kinds of mentoring.

THE ACTION OF THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

In the mentoring relationship the mentor and the youth engage in a joint activity where an interpersonal attraction makes it possible for the youth to "learn" something from someone he or she has come to trust, admire, or respect, or, more generally believe has something the youth desires or needs. We can say then that the mentoring occurs in two spaces: it occurs in the observable interaction of the mentor and the youth as they collaborate in a specific activity, and it occurs less visibly in the mind of the youth responding psychologically to the mentor and the mentoring experience.

The Social Action of Mentoring. What youth gain in learning and social competence depends on the activities they engage in, as well as the psychological quality of their relationship with the mentor. We can think of an "activity" as: the setting or environment of the mentoring, the verbal and motor actions of the mentor and the youth, and the previous experiences, motives, and conceptions they bring to the relationship. These activities do not have to be invented: everyday life provides many opportunities for the youth to learn something valuable. A mentor's ideas and behaviors are unlikely to have much influence on the youth unless they are embedded in an activity in the daily routines and experiences of the youth.

In the activity the mentor helps the youth successfully carry out a specific, limited aspect of a task by asking a timely question, or providing a verbal or nonverbal hint. The mentor creates a strategy that permits the youth who does not have control over the entire activity to perform successfully on a specific task. The assistance can be tailored and adjusted to the skill or psychological level of the youth. The mentor can also withdraw or reduce assistance when the youth will profit from greater independence. And as the activity proceeds, the mentor can make the work more challenging to the youth.

There are specific techniques for the mentor to help the youth in their joint activity:

Modeling: Presenting an image of how to perform in a particular situation which the youth can imitate, or giving the youth information about how to perform.

Feedback: Providing information about the youth's performance.

Contingency Management: Awarding (or punishing) the youth for the performance.

Instruction: Offering information and answers.

Questioning: Requesting a response that creates a mental operation that the youth would not engage in without the question.

Task Structuring: Separating and sequencing a task into its component parts.

Cognitive Structuring: Providing a means for the youth to organize existing structures for learning and perception or for creating new ones.

In effective mentoring the mentor and the youth share experiences that provide incentives for the youth's commitment and continued involvement. In their joint activities they come to share word meanings, concepts, motivations, beliefs, and expectations. They develop a common understanding of the purposes and meaning of the activity, and they begin to use common strategies and problem-solving techniques. From all aspects of the interaction the mentor and youth come to share a common emotional and cognitive world.

The Psychological Action of Mentoring. All humans have the capacity to seek out and form relationships with others to get help in meeting challenges at each stage of life. In mentoring the quality of the attention of the other person, the frequency of the interaction, and the familiarity and social similarity of the mentor and the youth foster the development of the relationship. Successful mentoring then depends on enough interpersonal attraction to initiate and cement the relationship in its early stages.

The interpersonal attraction also depends on whether the mentor can provide what the youth wants and needs. Mentors bring their particular caretaking or helping styles to the relationship. Some are "nurturers"; they naturally offer help, attention, and support. Some are "trainers" by nature, who want to provide skills and transmit appropriate behaviors and restrain the youth from dangerous or socially undesirable behaviors. Others are "controllers"; they correct, reward, punish and try to dominate. And still others are "socializers," who want to be the youth's friend, or "providers," who give the youth something concrete or access to an opportunity. Mentors are not trained to use a repertoire of interactive styles; they frequently just act instinctively and intuitively. But how the youth respond to these caretaking styles, and how closely they satisfy their needs, is as important as the shared activities of the mentor and the youth.

In the mentoring relationship the youth and the mentor enter into a tacit agreement. The mentor takes on different roles, which the youth allows, out of a natural need to attach to or identify with someone or out of practical self-interest.

In the role of *teacher* the mentor instructs or demonstrates a skill or imparts knowledge. The youth accepts the role of learner because he or she recognizes the value of what the mentor is offering.

In the role of *advisor* the mentor helps the youth set and achieve goals, motivates the youth, and acts as a constructive critic. The youth is cognitively and emotionally ready to accept this help, with its promise for the future, because it shows the youth the connections between desires, acts, and consequences. The youth also acknowledges the mentor's ability and wisdom: the mentor is viewed as someone who has achieved as an adult and thus is worthy of attention.

In the role of *supporter* the mentor provides concern, encouragement, or instrumental help. Out of need, the youth understands the value of this help.

In the role of *companion* the mentor is an alternative to peers and family members. The youth enjoys the mentor's company. The companionship may also serve the mentor in other roles.

A variety of conditions motivate the youth to use the mentor as a role model or resource. The frequency and intimacy of the relationship helps the youth adopt the mentor's patterns of behavior, although the image of the mentor can be retained even without constant interactions if the youth feels that the mentor can empathize with his or her situation, and thus is "there," even if absent. Importantly, this can best occur when the mentor and youth are engaged in a joint activity that is meaningful to the youth.

The mentoring relationship, however, is not just a social relationship. The youth may be looking for someone to identify with outside of her or his family or peer community. An identification with a mentor does not occur only through consciously observing and engaging socially with the mentor, but also unconsciously as well. The unconscious identification regulates the impulses of the youth because he or she finds an alternative means of gratification through the relationship. Adolescents have particularly strong feelings of love and aggression that are structured into actions in their best interests through transient identifications with unrelated adults.

THE EFFECT OF MENTORING ON THE YOUTH

Some of the good outcomes of mentoring are immediately apparent. In the social activities shared by the mentor and the youth, the youth frequently learns something that otherwise might not be learned. The youth's newly-gained knowledge about how to plot and structure tasks can be transferred and applied to the larger tasks and activities of life, which the youth can now better plan and execute. The relationship may also have a by-product for many youth: through the mentor they have opportunities for expanding their social network, and for low-income youth this means access to more educational, work, and social opportunities than their home and community present. In general, the youth become more socially competent than they were before.

Less immediately apparent, the mentoring relationship helps build the youth's sense of self. Adolescents compare themselves favorably or unfavorably with other people and rely on certain social standards. In the relationship the mentor acts as a mediator between these social influences and the youth's introspective and possibly distorted self-evaluation. We also know that an adolescent's self-esteem can be very much affected by the perception of others' opinions. The regard of the mentor for the behavior of the youth, then, in an arena of great importance or investment, helps build the youth's self-esteem. Youths also assume "multiple self-concepts" in the many roles they play, which the mentor can

help them integrate. Mentoring provides youths opportunities for self-observation in a number of social activities and psychological situations. Here the youth develop their own standards of behavior, not just adapt or measure themselves by the others' standards, but the mentor validates them.

MENTORING AND YOUTH OF COLOR

Many people maintain that minority youth need minority mentors not only because these adults represent the fruits of success, but also because only they can fully understand the youth's social and psychological experiences well enough to help them or act as models or figures of identification. These observers argue that minority youth are vulnerable to low self-esteem or have restricted views of their possibilities because of their environments and because they internalize the racial and ethnic attitudes of the larger society toward them. We also know, moreover, that to counter these destructive influences these youth internalize the regard and attitudes of teachers and mentors in their communities of the same race or ethnicity, who filter out belittling and fatalistic attitudes by sending them different messages.

Many minority youth also often must make conflicting choices between the values, accepted behaviors, and attitudes of their own group and those of the larger society. These youth must choose between assimilation, separation, and alienation from the larger society or a kind of biculturalism. They cannot easily remove themselves from their "home" environment, which, as has been suggested, may be a safer haven and more powerful to them than any special program. Not having the maturity or a fully integrated identity, they need guidance and support to evaluate these choices, and many people feel only a mentor of the same ethnic or racial group can understand this conflict well enough to truly help the youth.

It is true that mentors outside the youth's ethnic and cultural world cannot easily understand it. However, this does not mean that they cannot be good mentors. They can still offer social support to the youth and recognize and foster the areas of the youth's competence and values, even if they do not completely recognize or understand their source. The mentor outside the youth's world also represents an alternative and larger world, which minority youth, like all youth, are seeking, no matter what they feel about their own worlds.

The social contact and the psychological engagement of the mentoring relationship also breaches the social distance between the mentor and youth from different social or ethnic environments. Both the characteristics and caretaking style of the mentor and the joint activities engaged in by the mentor and the youth have the potential of creating a common ground for mediating their cultural differences. But for the youth to be able to deal with the stress of the relationship, the mentor has to be able to permit conflict, even aggression, and to tolerate the youth's desire for connectedness on the one hand and personal and social autonomy on the other.

MENTORING FOR RESILIENCE

Our goal for the development of all youth, but especially for at-risk youth, is to make them more resilient. Resilient youth are those who, despite being at risk because of personal, family, or social conditions, overcome adversity and survive — even thrive — through relationships with unrelated adults outside the immediate family. We might then say about mentoring, if youth today cannot bring this resilience to the relationships they form naturally, we must bring it into being in the mentoring experiences we make available to them, so that they can become resilient enough to form relationships in the future without our help.

— Erwin Flaxman

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